

Honoring Class: Working-Class Sensitivities in Honors Composition



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The existence of honors courses in higher education reflects the reproduction of inequities of the social-class system within the United States, a point made years ago by Bowles and Gintis (1976). In junior high and high school, privileged students begin this journey toward honors courses through AP and upper-track curricula. Jeanie Oakes' documents in *Keeping Track* (1985) that instructors of upper-track courses show much more enthusiasm toward these classes, demonstrate more creativity in lesson plans, give greater autonomy to students, and teach with more clarity and purpose. Universities and colleges, even community colleges, then present these select students with many options, among them the opportunity for honors courses. Jean Bridges (1994) reports that honors students in colleges across the nation can expect smaller classes, seminars rather than lectures, primary sources rather than textbooks, and more challenges than in regular sections of the same course. In other words, honors students constitute a privileged caste in whichever academic setting they find themselves, even an urban, open-admission university, such as the one where I teach.

Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, the issue of social class rarely injects itself into assignments in honors English composition courses. Of course, many honors students receive credit through examination for English Composition, but in our university, at least, students cannot test out of the second of our two-course sequence, which concentrates on argument and research. Thus, it would be logical for the theme-oriented courses often used for honors English sections to touch on class issues with such an obvious parallel to social class existing in the students' own education. This is apparently not the case if my department can be considered representative of honors programs. In an informal survey of the curriculum used in my department, some instructors essentially taught the same course as regular sections but with higher expectations of the students. Those who substantially deviated from the usual curriculum used themes, such as progress, '60's song lyrics, and dilemmas brought on by technology. Nobody devoted so much as an assignment directly to social class.

In my initial experience with honors students, I, too, neglected issues of social class and left the course disappointed at the students' unwillingness to push beyond obvious boundaries in terms of their analyses. It seemed they tried throughout the semester to guess the answers I wanted to hear and to give them back to me. They took few chances with structure, analysis, voice, or audience invocation. My assignment options attempted to reach them through subjects they claimed to be interested in—tattoos and body piercing, fast food, gender issues, AIDS, even voodoo—but across the board, their arguments appeared stale and static. Clearly bright students, they seemed baffled when I asked for complication in their thinking or to take a chance with an unconventional structure. They wanted to remain safe.

Phyllis Dallas and Mary Marwitz (2003), in the only recent scholarship of honors English curriculum I could find, support my observations. They discuss the use of "symbiotic texts," a strategy discussed in Joe Harris's (2003) recent—and lamentable—opinion piece in *College English*. Dallas and Marwitz assert that the honors students "tended to use the second text [in the symbiotic pairs] as a 'corrective' for the first and to reduce the complexity of the paired readings to a single one" (437). The students "wanted the text to be authoritative [and] were uncomfortable with coexisting belief systems" (437). In a situation where a guest lecturer discussed the Bible as literature, the students argued that the Bible is not open to interpretation and retreated to a more simplistic stance, although Dallas and Marwitz claim that "for a while, they [the students] felt that they could challenge authority by speaking" (439). Dallas and Marwitz do not discuss the incentive for students demonstrating complications in their writing nor the rewards for relying on safe positions and not tangling with the complexity surrounding issues. The tone in the article suggests, though, that the students in this course probably received high grades for sound arguments defending their positions.

It seemed to me that the students' desire for a corrective comes from the privileged isolation they and most honors students have always felt in school. As the intellectual if not social upper class throughout their education, they have assumed their abilities to be products of their natural gifts plus hard work. I would argue that the type of complexity of thought Dallas and Marwitz and I were looking for consists of an invisible class component, a type of analysis that understands the influence of social class as a determinant of success, quality, and mobility. To gain the type of critical insights we seek, we first, then, have to disrupt the class privilege these students are used to and suggest

alternatives to the honors' narrative of superior intellect and effort. In other words, we need honors students to acknowledge their class identity in order for them to develop the critical insights we desire in good writers. I designed an honors curriculum for an accelerated summer term I was scheduled to teach that did just this.

The Course

The students in this course read Michael Zweig's (2000) *Working Class Majority*, a text that argues that social class can best be understood as a relationship of power and control between capitalists and laborers. Since all but one of the students enrolled in the course had been admitted into our BSMD program for pre-med students, I found Zweig particularly relevant because he mentions the effects of class warfare on the medical profession, which I assumed—correctly—would interest these students. The students had several mini-assignments to complete that asked them to reflect upon their backgrounds and education. I asked questions that touched on issues surrounding their honors status and tried to phrase and sequence prompts in such a way as to suggest a connection between that status and their backgrounds. The bulk of the course work consisted of a narrative where they identified and discussed their class affiliation in light of Zweig's ideas, a collaborative essay where they used a class analysis to understand the medical profession, and a researched paper on a social class issue brought up in Zweig's text.

Before I got beyond the second chapter of the book, I presented my students with an essay I wrote about my multi-positioned class identity. As I have discussed in conference presentations the past few years, particularly at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, my background contains elements of both working-class and middle-class culture. Some of these conflicting class markers led more than a few of my former students to distrust me when I introduced social class as a theme for an assignment. In my position as a professor, they saw me as a purveyor of middle-class culture, something that my judgments on the quality of their work would confirm. Yet, I often told stories about aspects of my life that took place in distinctly working-class atmospheres, when I lived paycheck to paycheck during my early to mid-twenties. I was an ambiguous figure for previous students, then. Thus, I handed out the first assignment in this honors class and presented an extended narrative responding to the paper prompt called "The Class That Never Leaves You."

After reading this paper, some of my students felt that I was in denial about my class placement, that I did not want to associate with the middle class. Considering that I only devoted the last paragraph to my current life, where I feel more middle class than ever before, I can see how students reached this conclusion. Yet, I think I established the complications surrounding class identity, as well as introducing a sense of class markers missing in Zweig, and some students caught onto this. My use of my own life as an example of class identity paved the way for these honors students to explore the issue. Therefore, while they might have initially wanted an authoritative statement on social class in my text or to have it align completely with Zweig, they did not seem as uncomfortable as Dallas and Marwitz's students were with competing belief systems.

The background of the students in this course proved typical of students in our BSMD program. While gender was evenly divided, six students were Caucasian, four were Pakistani, two Indian, three Chinese, and one Korean. Twelve students identified themselves as middle class, three as upper class, and one as working class, views which changed for some after they completed the course. By analyzing responses to a questionnaire I devised about political situations that were current at the time, I could discern that ten of the students were fairly liberal, four fairly conservative, and two moderate. While I hate to talk about corresponding data with such a small group, some of the alignments proved interesting. It is not surprising, for instance, that two of the three students who identified as upper class held conservative positions. Of particular interest is that the conservatives and moderates deemed themselves "apathetic" or "indifferent" to politics at a much higher frequency than those who termed themselves "interested" or "open-minded." Only one of the liberals termed herself "indifferent" while all four of the conservatives considered themselves "apathetic" or "indifferent." Rather intriguing was the reaction to Affirmative Action. Eight of those I labeled liberal had mixed or negative feelings about it while two of the four conservatives, both ethnic minorities, believed in Affirmative Action. Both of the moderates were against Affirmative Action. Job experiences interested me as well. Three of the four conservative students spoke of job experiences with lax or otherwise ineffective supervision while four of the liberal students spoke of mixed or poor work experiences due to unkind or overly restrictive supervisors.

In terms of their education, twelve of the sixteen students at the end of the semester said that they liked the democratic and shared authority aspects that are pretty typical of classes I teach and would like other instructors to take their needs into consideration like I did with contract grading, negotiation of curriculum, and assignment co-creation (the students had developed the collaborative assignment and the research paper within parameters I established). While students from all backgrounds discussed times in previous educational experiences where they

had been forced into silence for disagreeing with an instructor, only four felt they were not free to speak in this classroom. One of them perceived a difference from my religious beliefs, one cited shyness, and the two others worried about being wrong or insignificant so kept quiet, harkening back to one student from Dallas and Marwitz's study, who did not speak even though he had questions because "he knew he wasn't supposed to" (438). Michael Zweig's text produced a sense of defamiliarization for the students, as no one had studied social class before. Only one student claimed that he disagreed with Zweig by the end of the course while four others said that while they could see his point, they did not believe that the knowledge of social class would affect them. One of the Pakistani women put it bluntly, saying she would "continue to relate social classes to income and lifestyle [rather than on Zweig's notion of power] because it is much easier."

To give a closer look at student reaction, I am going to present profiles of three students from the class, one each who identified with upper, middle, and working class at the beginning of the term, and look at how they negotiated social class in their writing.

Craig

Craig was an 18 year-old Caucasian student who had straightforward, conservative opinions on everything from the occupation of Iraq to gay marriage but termed himself "ignorant" about politics. He really warmed up to my teaching method, as he felt the contract system and the concentration on learning rather than grades allowed him to speak up freely without fear of losing points. While he resisted Michael Zweig's ideas at first, he came to agree with the critique about class. His writing, though, demonstrated a lack of reflection on his class privilege. While identifying himself as belonging to the upper class, since his father was a physician, he wrote that he was "humbled" to see that he should more properly be classified as middle class, based on Zweig's ideas. Craig's narrative stresses, perhaps as a result of his discomfort, that "wealth and proper behavior" should be taken into consideration when classifying social groups. He spoke dismissingly in an early draft of the first paper of a date where a girl from the working class did not know how to enjoy a fine Italian restaurant he had taken her to, ordering spaghetti and meatballs.

Like many students, understanding social class for Craig meant classification. If he could make a sound argument that people like himself should be considered or belonged in the upper class, then magically they would become upper class. Since his father was a physician and had "the ability to save human lives," Craig believed that a true exploration of power would have included such skills in the upper class. Therefore, he created an "intermediate" class between the middle and capitalist to place himself. Interestingly, this invention permitted him to agree with Zweig's critiques about distribution of wealth and capitalist greed.

His third paper, titled "Capitalist Mistreatment of Workers," explored the plight of the mushroom pickers of the Quincy Farmers in Gainseville, Florida. He wrote so strongly against the labor practices that I had to intervene to get him to balance his perspective with research from the other side. Still, the second paper, which was the collaborative effort with two others from the course, demonstrated some shallowness. While the group wrote effectively about the difficulties imposed upon doctors in the HMO system—exposing HMOs as capitalist profiteers—the solution was for them, upon joining the profession, to set up an office independent of HMOs so they could give the best treatment possible. When I asked how workers and others could afford private physicians' rates, suggesting that cutting their fees to make them affordable would be the obvious answer, Craig and the group members instead wrote that legislation must be instituted to cap malpractice premiums and the amounts patients could be awarded in a malpractice suit. Craig apparently could see the problems that surfaced through class-based critiques, but his identification with and ambition to continue to be upper class limited his understanding of his own implication in the system. Nevertheless, I think the complexity of thought absent in the students that Dallas and Marwitz discuss emerged in Craig's understanding of capitalist abuses.

Lian

Lian was a 17 year-old student of Chinese descent who came from a solid middle-class family. Both her parents held professional jobs, her mother being an engineer and her father working in a large corporation at an unstated position. She expressed mostly liberal perspectives on the current events I listed, but she had a mixed view on Affirmative Action, showing some bitterness that her race was not covered but also seeing the social justice involved. Her parents hated George W. Bush, and she seemed to go along with their views on the Patriot Acts and Iraq. Yet, Lian exhibited perhaps the most resistance to accepting Zweig's views on social class. Like Craig, she seemed to be more concerned with proper classifications that would shield her from those she considered lower than her. She

wanted to assure that her placement in the middle class did not put her side by side with truck drivers and other blue-collar workers, as Zweig had used an example that two truck drivers performing the same job could be in different classes depending upon if one of them owned his or her own rig (28). Lian writes:

In order to be grouped with the middle class, a person should have a certain degree of social distinction to belong [sic]. That sort of refinement and manner, I think, should come from years of education and hard work that enables someone to have an occupation that is considered skilled work. My reasoning for not agreeing with Zweig's definition, which puts truck drivers and physicians together in the same class, is also probably shared by society.

In conferencing with her, I found that her resentment toward middle-class truck drivers stemmed from friends of hers who always goofed off in school and now held manual jobs at hourly wages. She believed all unskilled laborers had slacked off, and she described truck driving as the least skilled profession she could think of. She had always dedicated herself to education and felt it was simply unfair for those types of people to have an opportunity to be in the same social class as her. She wanted to prescribe artificial boundaries or perhaps rely on class markers to make distinctions. While Craig felt wealth was important in determining class placement, Lian would have none of it, deferring instead to education and decorum. Her collaborative paper on a class analysis of the medical field revealed similar traits, as her group focused on the hierarchies established in medicine, which put the doctor in a top position. While the group showed sympathy toward nurses and others who were not treated with respect, they unproblematically approved of the parallel to a social class system. Their revision acknowledged the role of insurance companies and administrators but did not attempt to disrupt the privileged role that they hoped to find themselves in. Oddly, Lian wrote at the end of the semester that she saw her future as "more gloomy." I sensed, then, that some of the class critique had penetrated, even though it did not impact her group's revision.

Like Craig, Lian's final paper in the class demonstrated considerable sympathy for the victims of poverty. Verifying Zweig's claims that abuses by so-called welfare queens are quite minor, Lian argued that instead of blaming "the poor for being in their position because they are lazy, I think some of the problems that cause poverty, like a lack of education and job opportunities, should be addressed more closely." Notice that she still sees education as a key for helping people improve, but her paper looks at society for change rather than attacking the individual for not taking opportunities presented to them. She concluded that since unemployment had to be at 4% in a healthy capitalist economy, the welfare system does more good than harm, as at least 4% of those able to work cannot hold jobs during the best of times and current economic conditions certainly were not at their best. In her final reflection on the course, Lian said that her notions of class were too engrained in her for substantial changes to occur in her thinking. Yet, her final revision of paper #1, her narrative on class, spoke of the middle class's wish to help the working class. Her wavering and fear, though, come across in blatant statements:

Even if they [the middle class] have [a] wish to help the less fortunate to let them climb the social ladder, that comes on the condition that they will keep their own place. They are only willing to do so much before they feel that their position is threatened. The conflict of the middle then becomes deciding which class they want to side with. Do they want to work with the capitalist class to maintain their position or do they want to help the working class get a fair share of the wealth?

Lian is very torn, as her conclusion states that people in all classes are just people trying to make a living. She still wants class to be a category rather than a social and economic relationship of power, but I believe writing about her class identity did, indeed, disrupt her notions and enable her to see the connection between privilege and abuse of others.

Eileen

Eileen, who had just turned 18 a week before the class began, initially thought of herself as middle class but quickly changed her identification to working class. Her parents had worked blue-collar jobs. Her father had been a foreman, then had been promoted to middle-management, and had started wearing suits to work. However, he felt guilty enforcing some of the policies his superiors were creating, as he saw workers' rights being taken away, so he voluntarily returned to his position as a warehouseman. Eileen described herself as "open-minded" although her father was a Republican and frequently complained about Bill Clinton. Her narrative talked a little about her father's situation, but despite how evident it was, according to her, she did not see his change in status affecting her until recently. Like myself, she came to recognize divided class affiliations. When she started filling out college scholarship and government loan information, she saw that:

The government, through income, saw my family as financially stable. It was assumed that my parents

could easily pay the high cost of a college education. By using only income and assuming my family to be part of the middle class, they failed to take into account the aspects of working class family that makes paying for college difficult.

Eileen spoke of the huge debt her family lived under. Although unstated, I wondered if this came from excessive spending during the times when her father was in management. Eileen said she was not the only student running up against this problem.

A second episode recounted in the paper showed the middle-class fears she had developed, as she discussed moving into the city from her family's home in the suburbs and automatically worrying about being surrounded by low-class thieves and murderers. She admitted in her conclusion that she had resisted the label of "working class" for this latter reason. Her parents had always worked to get out of the working class but were still there, and she had been taught to be ashamed of a working-class identity. She then said that she saw acceptance of being in the working class as necessary, as workers could band together for their own benefit.

This sense of the working-class unity drifts into her collaborative essay with two other students. The group wrote about the struggle for control between doctors and HMOs, following Zweig's suggestion that the conflict can be seen as a class struggle between capitalists and the middle class. Very tellingly toward the end, the group writes:

They, as capitalists, are against the uprising of doctors. It is typical of capitalists to attempt to stop the banding together of their workers. They know that together, workers, in this case, doctors, have the power to force them to improve their working conditions.

Notice the juxtaposition of "doctors" and "workers." For Eileen and her group, there is no difference. Eileen's group, unlike others in the course, saw the need for doctors' unions and did not side with the capitalist or upper class. Eileen's last paper contains similar qualities, as she categorizes the middle and working classes together in her stand against tax cuts. Her research showed her that Bush's plans benefited primarily the capitalist class. Clearly, Eileen was able to tangle with the complexities within the issue of social class and see the injustice of privilege. She did not give up her goal of being upward bound, but she became fully cognizant of the difficulties she would face.

Closing Reflections

I think these case studies indicate that an honors curriculum that challenges students' worldviews through social class analysis can push honors students toward complex understandings. The place of narrative cannot be overlooked, as I think the introductory assignment—and my use of my own writing—opened the door for further understandings that the honors students would not have otherwise achieved. However, the constant reflection throughout the semester on their education helped disrupt their own inner narratives of the superiority and hard work of honors students. The above student profiles show that the students were still strongly invested in their sense of finer society, privilege in their futures as doctors, and protection from the masses, but I think this class-based curriculum reached the students. In allowing them to identify as a product of a class system, the honors students, at the very least, complicated notions they had held of working-class members deserving their fate. This ability to empathize with the plight of others—something different for them, I will argue, than the distant sympathy they might have held previously for the homeless or poor—certainly demonstrated the type of complex thinking absent previously.

While Joe Harris argues that instructors teaching toward critical consciousness cannot tell "when students have been raised to awareness and when they've simply figured out what they're supposed to say" (591), I have to believe that this course brought forth sincere responses from honors students. The difference between what I read in this section and in my previous sections with honors students would indicate as much. Yet, the implication of these case studies goes beyond the impact on these particular students or what the impact might be on another group. I believe, instead, that my experiences in this course suggest that regular honors curriculum might actually enable students to protect themselves from competing worldviews and prevent honors students from fulfilling their potential. If some of us do become frustrated with honors students for utilizing their tremendous studenting skills to seek out high grades rather than for experimenting with more complexity of thought, we are really indicting the privilege and isolation in which we teach higher achieving students. When we reward students for cooperation, we are ensuring that they will continue to cooperate rather than to complicate.

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"Honoring Class" from *Composition Forum* 14.2 (Fall 2005)

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